

An Officer's Perspective on The NCO's Role in...

Training

By MAJ Mike Galloucis

As I look back on my almost 13 years of active duty, I remember fondly (and sometimes not so fondly) how NCOs have helped me learn what it means to be a soldier—and, more importantly, what it means to be a leader.

My first exposure to Army NCOs came during ROTC summer camps. After my sophomore year in college, I went to Fort Knox, KY for ROTC Basic Camp, where I learned much about the Army in only six weeks. Back then, we still had "open bay" barracks—45 cadets living in one big room—with plenty of bunk beds and metal, one-door wall lockers. Teamwork and discipline were essential!

Each platoon had two sergeants first class drill sergeants and a sergeant major platoon evaluator. The only officer in the company was the commander, and the only time I saw him was at morning reveille, PT and graduation. He wasn't involved in cadet training. The drill sergeants taught me basic soldier skills and the platoon evaluator was responsible for my initial leadership training. The majority of these NCOs served with combat units in Vietnam, and they were top-notch professionals.

After my junior year, I went to Fort Bragg, N.C., for ROTC Advance Camp. At Bragg, I gained a better appreciation for what I'd learned the summer before. The little "tricks of the trade" the NCOs at Knox taught me really paid off—such as how to pack a rucksack, how to navigate "smartly," how to clear a jammed M-16, conduct drill and ceremonies, manage time effectively, etc. At Bragg, I also got my first exposure to Army paratroopers. Those "can do" airborne NCOs were highly motivated and provided a superior leadership model to emulate.

I still remember doing four-count push-ups in a platoon formation after a long run around Bragg in the middle of July. As my arms began to feel like Jello, I thought to myself, "this platoon sergeant is a real turkey—can't he see we're dying?" About this time, I looked up and realized the crusty old Green Beret NCO not only barked, "get down and give me fifty"; he was doing them with us!

As was the case with the NCOs at Knox, the NCOs I encountered at Bragg were top-notch professionals, eager to help a cadet reach his potential and learn what it means to be an Army leader.

As a new second lieutenant fresh out of the officer basic course, I reported for my first assignment as a platoon leader in Germany. I was motivated and possessed basic tactical and technical competence. But, aside from basic leadership skills I'd learned growing up (i.e. parents, athletics, civilian jobs), in ROTC and OBC, I had little practical experience leading—particularly leading soldiers.

I learned a valuable lesson about people at my first duty assignment: you can't judge someone by appearance alone. It took almost a year to drive this point home. My first platoon sergeant was a pudgy staff sergeant who at first glance appeared out of touch with reality, not to mention out of shape. I felt this platoon was falling quite short of its capabilities, and I initially attributed this poor performance to the platoon sergeant.

My relationship with him in those early months was less than ideal, and eventually he talked the commander into moving him from the platoon to be the training NCO. Shortly after, a new sergeant first class reported for duty as my platoon sergeant.

I'd hoped for a disciplinarian and was a little disappointed to discover the new man generally was a laid-back person who didn't seem to fit the mold of what I thought the platoon needed from its platoon sergeant.

I was wrong on both counts. The hefty staff sergeant turned out to be one of the finest soldiers I've ever known. Later, I fought (and succeeded) to get him back and he was instrumental in helping the platoon excel in all its missions. Several years later, I saw the same NCO at Fort Hood where he'd lost much of the weight, been promoted to sergeant first class and was once again a platoon sergeant helping turn second lieutenants into leaders. As for the quiet, unassuming sergeant first class, he immediately "took charge" of the platoon—albeit not in the customary way—helped restore esprit and generally turned out to be an ideal platoon sergeant.

Several other NCOs, including the battalion command sergeant major, first sergeant and other platoon sergeants at my first unit, took me "under their wings" and attempted to teach me how to be a good officer. I learned a great deal about people, leadership, the Army and myself from those NCOs.

The next "lesson" I'd learn from an NCO came in my first staff position as a battalion assistant S-3. Having served as a platoon leader in two units for more than three years, I thought I knew something about troop leadership. But, I knew nothing of "staff work."

More than anyone else, the person who helped me be-

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come an effective staff officer was a master sergeant who was within one year of retirement. Although this old soldier had a bad back, knees and ingested aspirin at an alarming rate, he possessed the institutional knowledge of four people, plus the savvy on how to get things done on a staff. What surprised me most was his eagerness to pass his vast knowledge on to me. Fortunately, I succeeded in learning as much as I could from this soldier before we went separate ways.

In Germany, while attending a course in Bad Tolz, I also met a first sergeant (now a CSM) who positively exuded leadership. He's still an inspiration, even though I haven't seen him in nine years; that's what you call a lasting impression!

Upon returning stateside, I was assigned to Fort McClellan, Ala., as an operations officer for a complex project known as a Force Development Test and Experimentation. After several months working by myself, I got an unexpected—but welcome—surprise: a master sergeant who just completed several years as a drill sergeant and first sergeant in the training brigade. His leadership, work ethic and professionalism contributed immeasurably to the success of the project.

On two occasions, I've had the privilege of commanding company-sized units. In both cases, NCOs played key roles in the unit. As an MP company commander in Korea, I was blessed with several superb NCOs who truly were the "backbone" of the unit.

As an HHC commander in a mechanized infantry brigade at Fort Hood, I benefitted immensely from two combat arms first sergeants who balanced taking care of soldiers, looking out for the officers, and accomplishing the mission as well as I've seen it done. There were also many other NCOs in the unit who successfully balanced their brigade staff and company leadership responsibilities.

From a late-summer rotation at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., to a winter deployment to Germany for REFORGER, I saw my NCOs doing miraculous things at all hours of the day and night; in the desert's early September heat to Bavaria's cold in January. It's a great feeling for a commander to see the unit performing effectively during extended field deployments or other less than ideal conditions; smart commanders know that won't happen without quality NCOs.

Between commands, I served in a brigade S-3 shop. Once again, I benefitted from the counsel, support and professionalism of Army NCOs. For most of my tour on a brigade staff, I worked with two master sergeants who epit-

omized the quality of today's NCO. Both were technically and tactically proficient, had the energy of an 18-year-old, were airborne qualified, physically fit, had college degrees, wrote and spoke well and had served in troop leadership positions for the majority of their careers.

I continue to learn from NCOs. Today, I routinely seek the counsel of several senior NCOs who work in my organization. Their advice on a myriad of issues has always been right on the mark and has helped me become proficient in a secondary specialty.

It's been a genuine pleasure for me to see many of the NCOs I've served with going on to positions of greater responsibility. It proves to me the Army's promotion system—while not infallible—does recognize and reward proven performers.

Throughout this article, I've tried to show the important role NCOs played in my development as an Army officer. Sure, I've served with and seen some mediocre NCOs, but I've also served with some mediocre officers. Images of those sub-par NCOs have been more than overshadowed by numerous NCOs who have gone the extra mile for their soldiers, the Army and me personally. To these professional soldiers, I dedicate this article—with renewed gratitude and pride.

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